

Island Students Lobby Legislature on Sustainability

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Last week was spring break in Alaska, and while many teenagers spent their week of free time on vacation or decompressing from a winters worth of school, a handful have travelled to the state's capital to advocate for sustainable food and environmental stewardship.

The Civics and Conservation Summit gives 20 students from across the state a week-long tour of the Alaska Legislature. Liz Allard is a youth leadership specialist for Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, a program of the Alaska Center of Environment, and said AYE was started by three teens from Kodiak and three teens from Anchorage in 1998. She said the civic summit sends participants to Juneau each year for a unique, hands-on learning experience.

-- (Teen Summit 1 :45 "And the whole week is surrounded around this idea of civic engagement. So learning about how to communicate with legislatures, learning how to communicate with the media and learn more about bills and the legislative process. So they are also learning to communicate with their legislators and by doing that they are going to meetings with them, so they each focus on a bill and this year they are focusing a lot on sustainable food policies. So each of them focuses on a bill surrounded around food policy this year and then they are meeting the with the bill sponsors and advocating for sustainable food policies. And they also are going to be meeting with their representatives and senators and talking with them too about their envisioned food future for Alaska.")

Leila Pyle is a senior at Kodiak High School and said she is following a resolution that would form a food resources development working group.

-- (Teen Summit 2 :48 "And so its title was House Concurrent Resolution 1, but it actually passed the House yesterday, while we were here at the summit. So that was really exciting. So now it's Senate Concurrent Resolution 1 that we are following. And it would form a working group under the governor that would work with different state agencies from all different agencies -- Department of Corrections, Department of Natural Resources and Department of Commerce and numerous organizations, to promote policies that would increase food sustainability in Alaska and using food as a natural resource in the state and keeping it within communities and trying to increase production of local food.")

Pyle said this is her first time in Juneau and she's already learned so much about the Legislature and the process of creating and passing bills. She said it's fascinating how quickly something can move through the once it gains support. But the students are also learning what happens when there isn't support. Chloe Hawkins is a 7th grader from Old Harbor and said the bill she is following, which would provide funding for school lunches, hasn't even been heard in a committee.

-- (Teen Summit 3 :04 "This bill has been sitting for four years.")

She said it was interesting, and slightly frustrating, to hear that disagreement among senators has caused the bill to sit for that length of time.

In general, both Pyle and Hawkins said the experience has taught them a lot, and they were both nervous and excited for a salmon barbecue that AYE (A-yuh) hosts annually. Allard said the event is a more informal setting for participants to interact with legislators.

-- (Teen Summit 4 :40 "And during that barbecue we're going to be recognizing four senators and representatives as legislator of the year. And the teens will be awarding four mystery legislators right now, because we haven't revealed who it is yet. During that time our teens are also going to be debuting their statewide food book project, Leila has been working on it with us throughout the year. And this is a project that has brought in over 30 teens from across the state and they have been working to create a book that emphasizes their envisioned food future for Alaska and highlighting local food ingredients and resources that teen really connect to through recipes and stories and artwork.")

Both Pyle and Hawkins hope to bring what they learn this week back to Kodiak and Old Harbor. As a senior, Pyle said the experience hasn't necessarily inspired a career in politics, but she said whatever she does she will definitely stay involved in the political process any way she can. Hawkins said she will most likely return to the summit in future years, and hopes to inspire other students from her village to do the same.

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